REFLECTING ON PEDAGOGY: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN AN ARMENIAN UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM

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Summary

This article constitutes the first part of a two-part study and focuses on the author's teaching experience with first-year students of the *"Social Pedagogy"* bachelor's program at a state university in Armenia. The article is presented as a personal academic reflection with an emphasis on the teaching process itself. Although much of the discussion is based on personal experience, the observations and analyses offered here may be applicable and valuable in similar pedagogical contexts. The article first outlines the pedagogical approaches initially intended versus those actually implemented, followed by an analysis of student responses, taking into consideration both local and global pedagogical challenges that emerged during classroom interactions. In the subsequent discussion, the difficulties arising between traditional and alternative pedagogical methods are examined, highlighting their relevance within the Armenian context against the backdrop of a worldwide shift toward cognitivist and student-centered approaches. The article concludes with several suggested guidelines for modifications aimed at improving the effectiveness of future course delivery.

Keywords*: cooperative pedagogy, pedagogical process, alternative teaching methods, traditional methods, pedagogical challenges, educational environment.*

Introduction and Overview

This article is the first of two interrelated pieces on my experience teaching a course on cooperative learning to an all-female cohort of first-year education students majoring in social pedagogy at a state university in Armenia. It focuses on two threads of thought that emerged retrospectively as I reflected informally on my weekly classroom interactions with the students. These threads, generated through a combination of memory and intuitive, non-formal observation, pertain to two interrelated topics: the constructivist-critical pedagogical framework I sought to implement while teaching the course, and a set of student behaviors I presume to have arisen, at least in part, in response to these pedagogical attempts.

I argue that the gap between my intentions and classroom outcomes reflects tensions between the didactic, lecture-based methodology still prevalent in Armenia and the student-centered, cognitivist approach—part of a broader global pedagogical shift—that I also sought to introduce in my classroom. Insights from this reflective process include consideration of the uncertainties inherent in my own pedagogical intentions and their possible role in provoking student responses such as distraction, indifference, and tedium. Suggested steps to enhance the pedagogical quality of the course include attention to concepts such as "communities of practice" and "learning culture." The article concludes with a preview of the

second installment, which will explore in greater theoretical depth the dual challenge of improving both the structure and delivery of the course and the quality of the classroom community through an autonomous, self-regulating curriculum.

Purpose.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the pedagogical actions I either envisioned or enacted while teaching the course introduced above. Questioning my own practice as a teacher to gain a firmer grasp of the challenges that shaped the teaching and learning process in my classroom lies at the root of this purpose. Improving my teaching practice—drawing on insights gained from this process of informal reflective inquiry—and linking these insights to ongoing observation and interpretation of classroom experience, are also relevant to this aim.

Guiding Question: What pedagogical and sociocultural challenges arise when introducing non-traditional teaching methods in an education system still rooted in lecture-based traditions?

Methodology & Implications

This article relies on the informal mode of reflective practice, in which the practitioner critically reflects on their lived teaching experiences to foster ongoing professional growth. This approach is not structured to gather empirical evidence through systematic observations or other formal methods. Informal inquiry treats teacher engagement with pedagogy as a valid and credible source of knowledge about teaching and learning.

A practical implication of the article concerns pedagogical praxis: the process of integrating theory and practice through reciprocal cycles of reflection and action, with the goal of ongoing improvement and adaptation.

Scope Note

I do not use the terms teacher and learner interchangeably in this article. Since I conceive of assuming the positionality of a learner as a process of becoming, beyond introducing the concepts denoted by each term and discussing their differences, I revert to the term teacher for the remainder of the article. Finally, I use teacher broadly to signify educators at all levels.

The Experience: Thoughts, Observations, and Reflections.

As I look back on a teaching experience I completed in the spring semester of 2025 with an all-female cohort of first-year students in an undergraduate education program at a state university in Armenia, threads of thought and fragments of reflection resurface.

One of these threads concerns pedagogy—the questions I entertained initially, and still do, about ways of working with my students, and the roles assumed, or that might be assumed, by teacher and student during the process of teaching and learning.

Early in our encounters, I considered talking with members of my class about observations I had made of them playing the role of *student*, to see if we could discuss how to embark on the path of becoming a *learner* instead. In hindsight, before I delve into my earlier thoughts on what distinguishes the educational practices associated with each of these two concepts, it is important to note how I differentiate—though it may appear negligible—between playing a role and being in a role. The former—as in the case of some of my students—I understand as a more self-conscious, perhaps guarded act; the latter, as a more fluid way of responding to the traits expected of a role.

A suitable place to begin unpacking the differences that distinguish learner from student as educational and cultural concepts is by tracing and comparing the etymological origins of the words themselves.

One common dictionary definition of *student*, derived from the Latin verb *studere*, is "a person eager to apply oneself," an adjectival phrase that connotes studiousness. Concurrently, the predominant cultural expectation of the student ascribes to this role an effortful disposition—one that conveys diligence and dutifulness, while also implying compliance.

In contrast, the Old English root of the word *learner—leornian*, also a verb—refers to the acts of a person in pursuit of knowledge. In this sense, where learning can be thought of as a process, studying is more about an attitude. Compared with the relative stillness of the student, the learner signifies a more active stance. This position of stasis evokes how Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational philosopher, describes the limitations of the student role in his banking model of education: as a collector or cataloguer, rather than a transformer or creator, passively storing information [3, p. 58]. Of contextual relevance to this comparison, bell hooks, the prominent American feminist theorist, differentiates between the student who assumes a passive consumerist role and the one who is an active participant (the learner-my insertion) [4, p. 14].

To deepen the distinctions between the dispositions I ascribe to the student role and those associated with the learner, I next compare the meanings of the adjectives *formal* and *exploratory*. Being exploratory entails vulnerability to error—a quality the formal stance often eschews. *Exploratory* also connotes self-regulating curiosity, an active engagement in the learning process that the formal posture, in its dutifulness, lacks.

Juxtaposing the student and learner roles in the context of educational discourse further illustrates this difference: while a learner thrives on seeking knowledge in both formal and informal settings, a student—although characteristically studious—tends to be a more passive actor oriented toward absorbing knowledge primarily within institutional settings.

Returning to the idea of vulnerability, another meaning I impute to the learner in educational environments is one that entails risk-taking—mustering the emotional maturity necessary to enter the uncertain and transitional world of pedagogical liminality. This involves finding one's way into spaces where burgeoning learners can begin to teach each other—and themselves—how to pose questions relevant to their daily concerns, while also raising the possibility that what they are being taught might become more inclusive of their own interests.

The historical precursor to this kind of active engagement with one's lived experiences and interests can be traced to John Dewey—a central figure in 20th-century educational thought—who argued that education and the educative process would dwindle to mere "pressure from without" if young people were not encouraged to pursue their own interests independently of those mandated by the school or decided upon primarily by their teachers [2, p. 23].

As my thoughts unfolded, I also reflected on the concept of role fluidity in the context of power relations: how it might shape the question of authority in the classroom. I asked what it would take for teacher and students (learners) to be less fixated on who is in charge, thereby increasing the possibilities of interchangeability between the two roles and, in turn, diminishing authority. Here, Freire's idea of reconciling the polarity between the two roles so that each participant acts as both student and teacher at the same time is instructive [3, p. 59].

Extending this reflection, I wondered how the feelings associated with either of these roles—including their gendered dimensions—might shift across classroom settings, from those in which the student–teacher relationship is structured vertically to those in which it is more horizontal.

Overall, as I reflect on the pedagogical goals I envisioned for my students and myself while teaching a course on cooperative learning, I am puzzled by the contrast between my

vision of our joint striving toward the transformation of entrenched educational norms and what I took to be my students' apparently dutiful and reserved response in affirming those norms. But to what extent should this disparity be a cause for concern? If, in fact, what I perceived my students to be doing at that moment—consciously or not—was merely an attempt to reproduce the educational expectations of a system that prioritizes placing the teacher at the podium and, as a result, relegates the student to waiting for the appropriate signals to follow, then my confusion is perhaps less surprising.

Yet, there is a difference between compliance shaped by pedagogic enculturation and behavior compelled by lack of choice.

To clarify further, it is important not to lose sight of the conceptual and physical constraints intrinsic to the lecture-based method that both my students and I had to contend with throughout our time together. For instance, consider the prohibitive impact—despite my intentions to the contrary—of the predetermined frontality of the classroom we met in regularly: rigid rows of seats, difficult to rearrange. Or take into account how the relative brevity of our class meetings—another hallmark of historically entrenched, teacher-centered pedagogies—may have fostered a general climate of routine compliance, reinforcing the socialization of students into passive learning roles and limiting our ability to engage with the planned components of the class format more vigorously and genuinely.

Given such parameters, how can I be certain that my students—the learners I hoped they would become—were not, in effect, coerced into the role-playing game they enacted? For that matter, to what extent was I myself immune to the same? What feasible choices could either of us exercise—if inclined and able—to resist the entrenched expectations tied to these various practices of teacher-centered pedagogy?

Another thread I return to, also grounded in my classroom observations, differs from the one that preceded it in that, instead of imagining or anticipating the pedagogies I prefer as an educator, it focuses on patterns of student behavior, perhaps indicative of a direct response to the teaching approaches I was actually able to implement while teaching my course.

The first of these patterns manifested in various ways: classroom discussions inundated with crosstalk, spontaneous chatter on the margins of the main conversation, and a nearly compulsive, seemingly unrestrainable focus on their touchscreens, as if awaiting the next text, social media message, or image.

The second of these patterns, by contrast, emerged as aloofness and ennui. If my observations were accurate, could this behavior reflect the guarded conformity associated with the pedagogical inheritance I discussed earlier in the article? Alternatively, might student indifference, detachment, and listlessness be habitual expressions that reproduce themselves reflexively? While these behaviors may represent a defensive response to a teacher's alternative pedagogical intentions, they are more likely to reflect the erosive effects of limited decision-making opportunities in a lecture-based, teacher-centered classroom.

This aligns with the perspective of mathematics educator and researcher Natanael Karjanto, who explains that long-term exposure to learning environments that restrict active student participation and reinforce deference to teacher authority fosters both compliance with normative expectations and resistance to the unconventional [5, p. 3].

Turning specifically to my own experience with this cohort, I attribute the emergence of the student coping mechanism to feelings of uncertainty or doubt regarding my pedagogical intentions. I suspect these trepidations stemmed from three converging factors: first, the classroom inflexibility I have already described; second, my assumption that my observations reflected the role the lecture-based methodology ascribes to students; and third, my own

hesitancy in articulating the relationship I hoped we might establish between traditional and alternative pedagogies, favoring the latter.

The result was a classroom in which the opportunities I provided for students to explore, question, and take responsibility for their learning often failed to align with their tendencies to defer to authority, uphold formality, exercise restraint for fear of making mistakes, and withhold initiative. This left me wondering how the decision-making process I implemented might have unfolded differently.

Regarding ways to tackle this challenge, one can consider the renowned American social anthropologist Jean Lave's concept of communities of practice. Lave emphasizes that, above all, learning requires individuals to first gain membership in a community where a set of core practices—representing the essential skills, knowledge, and routines of that community—are continuously enacted [6, p. 65]. Complementing this perspective, Karjanto proposes an approach that begins by engaging with the dominant pedagogical culture of one's classroom and then aims to establish a commonly agreed-upon "learning culture" before introducing pedagogical ideas and practices that may be new or unfamiliar to students [5, p. 3]. Together, these approaches underscore the importance of grounding learning in shared practices and culturally situated participation.

A pivotal question at this point is how the students' behaviors—formality, distraction, and tedium—may have reflected not only responses to the pedagogical inconsistencies—or paradoxes—within our classroom, but also the ways in which broader macrocosmic (global) pedagogical influences intersected with the microcosmic (local) context of our daily teacher–student interactions. While the answer may appear straightforward, it warrants a brief examination of the implications for the Armenian context of the globally observed shift that questions the continuing viability of traditional teaching models and advocates for a range of alternative pedagogies.

Ample evidence, including anecdotal accounts, suggests that Armenia's educational institutions—both schools and universities—continue to rely heavily on a didactic philosophy of education, largely exemplified by the lecture-based methodology. This frontal approach casts students as passive recipients of content delivered by the teacher, even with widely used modifications such as time for student questions and media technology for visual enhancement of instruction (Christina I. Petersen et al.) [8, p. 1].

In such an environment, as the traditional model resists the competing influence of recursively oriented teaching theories and practices—such as constructivism, social constructivism, experiential learning, and inquiry-based learning, all of which emphasize the centrality of student engagement—tension inevitably arises.

Thus, it is only in conjunction with this global systemic tension—further amplified by the rapid advance of digital learning tools, another force eroding the authority of teacher-led methods—that one can more fully grasp the interplay between pedagogy and student behavior in the local context of my classroom.

In Armenia, both students and teachers must contend with the ongoing tension between tradition and reform, between precedence and experiment. For the teacher—including myself, despite my intermittent residency in the country—some of the most pressing questions, I imagine, concern when and how to transition from custom to novelty: what to relinquish, what to preserve, and what to adopt from innovation—and why, and when?

There is, of course, more for teachers to consider. In breaking with tradition, what if class sessions were extended beyond their current limits, giving students additional time to

explore their assigned topics? How might this enhance learning, and how would such a change affect curriculum design and implementation? In his blog post *Breadth vs. Depth: The Deeper Learning Dilemma*, David T. Conley argues that achieving deeper student learning depends on the teacher's ability to identify what he calls "keystones"—concepts or skills that help establish a well-informed balance between breadth and depth. Meanwhile, the depth of understanding students can achieve in this way will cultivate their awareness of how subject-area experts utilize their content knowledge [1].

On the practical side of knowledge acquisition, how well do we support our college-age students—especially the younger ones—in thinking through why university education matters and what they can expect in return for the time they invest? Finally, on the quintessential question of how learning itself takes place, what answers can we as teachers and instructors offer to persuade young people that the university remains a viable environment for learning and scholarship, despite the rapid rise of technologies providing access to a wide array of alternatives?

Alongside their teachers, Armenian students too will be compelled to reflect on the time they are asked to spend in the traditional university classroom, a model whose pedagogical—and consequently sociocultural—viability is increasingly questioned by the rapidly changing world they inhabit.

Framed in the first-person voice, the questions I imagine a student grappling with might include: "With all that is going on in the world around me, how much of what I am taught, and how I am taught it, is truly relevant to my life? Concerning the view that I lack interest or desire to take initiative, is this because, having so often deferred to authority, I have convinced myself that inactivity may in fact be the simpler way of resolving the conundrum of the student–teacher relationship in the classroom?

But wait—could it also be that being lectured to, however convenient and practical a way of receiving information it may have become, now faces too many eager and powerful competitors vying for my attention?

Here is who and what these competitors are: chat groups on social media; virtual and real-time circles of friends; streaming platforms and videogames; all the knowledge I can access on the internet; the rapidly rising allure of artificial intelligence; commodity cultures—the promise of things I may buy in the future; and the world of work, sought either out of necessity, to lessen family hardship, or for the job-related skills it can teach that the classroom may not.

And, as if this were not enough, how do I find respite from the additional pressures of work and study? Will I be able to land a meaningful job, one rooted in social mobility, when I am done with my studies? How reassured can I be that in securing employment merit, rather than privilege, will play the determining role?"

Given the ongoing tension between preservation and innovation in Armenia's cultural milieu, analyzing how the merger of local and global facets of the pedagogies I implemented in my class contributed to the challenges my students and I encountered falls beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that this merger was characterized not only by convergences, but also by divergences, juxtapositions, and overlaps that intensified the classroom environment.

What fits well within the scope of this discussion, however, is the challenge of identifying steps that not only reduce the friction I observed between pedagogy and student behavior, but also open pedagogical pathways for improving the quality of any future class of

similar character—both in terms of social interaction and physical setting—that I may be asked to teach.

What I want to suggest as a solution to this challenge is a dual effort: one that aims to restore and strengthen the sociocultural vitality of the classroom community, alleviate the adverse effects of student distraction and disengagement, and design and implement a highly engaging curriculum. The first step toward realizing this hybrid endeavor requires taking heed of John Dewey's belief that, just as home life is a form of community, the school too must be a place where the information provided, lessons learned, and habits formed pursue— but do not avoid—the formation of community [2, p. 25].

In a chapter of her book *The Schoolhome*, Jane Roland Martin, the eminent American educational philosopher, expounds on Dewey's idea by critiquing the disregard for the continuity of home-school relations as intended by Dewey, and, in doing so, bemoans the absence of—across academic settings that are largely skill- and standard-based—human attributes such as love, care, concern, and connection [7, p. 122].

Building on the first, the second step of this pedagogical undertaking also evokes Dewey, again through Martin, as she interprets the Deweyan concept of self-discipline—a behavioral and psychological phenomenon that is autonomous from external authority. Elaborating on the concept, Martin explains, "It derives from activities whose inner 'logic' exerts its own demands on the participants [students—my insertion]" [7, p. 131].

Transposed into an Armenian context, this concept can be best harnessed through the implementation of activities that, while offering students opportunities for immersive participation in learning about the world, are also inherently demanding enough to push them beyond their comfort zones.

It is the theoretical and practical specifics of this integrated project—aimed at transforming dormancy, inertia, and apathy into curiosity, engagement, and momentum—that my next article will explore.

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Մեհրանեան Եփրեմ
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«Ջորջիա» քոլեջի կրթության ասոցիացիայի անդամ,
Ամերիկայի Միացյալ Նահանգներ,
ԵՊՀ մանկավարժության և կրթության զարգացման կենտրոնի
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Ամփոփում

Սույն հոդվածը երկմասյա ուսումնասիրության առաջին մասն է, որի առարկան Հայաստանի պետական համալսարանի բակալավրիատի «Սոցիալական մանկավարժություն» կրթական ծրագրում սովորող առաջին կուրսի ուսանողուհիներին իմ դասավանդման փորձառության ամփոփումն է։ Հոդվածը կառուցված է որպես անձնական գիտակրթական անդրադարձ՝ կենտրոնանալով դասավանդման գործընթացի վրա։ Թեև հոդվածի մեծ մասը հիմնված է անձնական փորձառության վրա, կարծում ենք ներկայացված դիտարկումներն ու վերլուծությունները կարող են ունենալ կիրառելիություն և արժեք մանկավար-

ժական համանման միջավայրերում։ Սկզբում ներկայացվում են նախատեսված ու իրականում կիրառված մանկավարժական մոտեցումները, ապա քննվում է ուսանողների արձագանքը՝ հաշվի առնելով տեղական ու համաշխարհային մանկավարժական մարտահրավերները, որոնք առաջացել են լսարանի ներգործությունների արդյունքում։

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Հոդվածի ավարտին առաջարկվում են մի շարք բարեփոխումների ուղենիշներ հետագա դասավանդման արդյունավետության բարձրացման նպատակով։

Բանալի բառեր՝ համագործակցության մանկավարժություն, մանկավարժական գործընթաց, մանկավարժական այլընտրանքային մեթոդներ, ավանդական մեթոդներ, մանկավարժական մարտահրավերներ, մակավարժական միջավայր։

ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ: ПРЕПОДАВАНИЕ И УЧЕНИЕ В АРМЯНСКОЙ СТУДЕНЧЕСКОЙ АУДИТОРИИ

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Аннотация
Данная статья является первой частью двухкомпонентного исследования и посвящена преподавательскому опыту автора в группе студенток первого курса образовательной программы бакалавриата *«Социальная педагогика»* государственного университета Армении. Работа построена как личная академическая рефлексия, сосредоточенная на самом процессе преподавания. Несмотря на то, что значительная часть статьи основана на личном опыте, представленные наблюдения и аналитические выводы могут быть полезны и применимы в сходных педагогических условиях. Вначале излагаются педагогические подходы, которые предполагалось применить, и те, что были реализованы на практике. Затем анализируются реакции студентов, с учётом как локальных, так и глобальных педагогических вызовов, проявившихся в процессе аудиторного взаимодействия. В дальнейшем рассматриваются трудности, возникающие между традиционными и альтернативными методами преподавания, подчёркивается их значение в армянском контексте на фоне общемирового перехода к когнитивным и студентоцентричным стратегиям. В заключении статьи предлагаются модификации курса, направленные на повышение эффективности последующего преподавания.

Ключевые слова: педагогика сотрудничества, педагогический процесс, альтернативные методы обучения, традиционные методы, педагогические вызовы, образовательная среда.

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